DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 441 462 IR 057 733

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TITLE	Prison Librarians Needed: A Challenging Career for Those with the Right Professional and Human Skills.
PUB DATE	1999-08-00
NOTE	9p.; In: IFLA Council and General Conference. Conference Programme and Proceedings (65th, Bangkok, Thailand, August 20-28, 1999); see IR 057 674.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla65/papers/046-132e.htm.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Foreign Countries; Guidelines; Job Skills; Librarians; *Library Role; *Library Services; Library Standards; Occupational Information; *Prison Libraries; Public Libraries; User Needs (Information)
IDENTIFIERS	Europe; North America; United States

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the background and roles of prison libraries in North America and Europe. Identified roles include: popular reading materials center; independent learning center; formal education support center; leisure and recreational activities center; legal information center; treatment program support center; information center on outside community; personal retreat center; staff research center; and school curriculum support center. The similarities and differences between public and prison libraries are described. The information needs and reading interests of inmates are highlighted, and reference is made to international and national prison library standards and guidelines. The educational and human qualifications needed to be a successful prison librarian are also considered, and the difficulties and rewards inherent in this still untraditional career choice are explained. (Author/MES)

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ED 441 462

IFLANET Search Contacts
International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions
Annual Conference

65th IFLA Council and General Conference

Bangkok, Thailand,
August 20 - August 28, 1999

Conference Proceedings

Code Number: 046-132-E
Division Number: III
Professional Group: Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons
Joint Meeting with: -
Meeting Number: 132
Simultaneous Interpretation: *No*

Prison librarians needed: a challenging career for those with the right professional and human skills

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Abstract

The paper examines the background and roles of prison libraries in North America and Europe. The similarities and differences between public libraries and prison are described. The information needs and reading interests of inmates are highlighted, and reference is made to international and national prison library standards and guidelines.

The author also looks at the educational and human qualifications needed to be a successful prison librarian and explains the difficulties and rewards inherent in this still "untraditional" career choice.

IR057733

Paper

Background on prison libraries and their patrons

Incarcerated persons generally have the same reading interests and information needs as individuals in the free world; they can, however, be considered disadvantaged by the mere fact that they do not have physical access to libraries in the outside community. Demographic data show that they are further disadvantaged by a disproportionally high level of illiteracy, lack of educational attainment, insufficient vocational skills, and a high rate of mental illness and emotional instability. This is certainly the case in North America and Western Europe, the geographical areas with which this author is most familiar.

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Very little research has been published on the nature and extent of prison libraries in other parts of the world, so any generalizations and conclusions made in this paper pertain primarily to the situation in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe. In these countries most prisons provide access to reading materials for recreational, educational, and informational purposes, and many have well established libraries that function much like regular public libraries or combined public/school libraries. In the United States alone there are over 900 libraries in correctional facilities (prisons) operated by state and federal government authorities), as well as hundreds more library service arrangements in local jails and detention centers.

Much progress has been made over the last three decades in both North America and Europe in developing professionally staffed prison libraries, mainly through the efforts of national library associations, state library agencies, public library systems/authorities, and academic institutions. The governance model for prison libraries may be in the form contracted services between public libraries and/or institutions of higher learning, operation solely by the prison authority, and formal or informal arrangements by volunteer groups. It is not unusual to see a combination of these service methods in a single institution. Regardless of the funding and staffing source, librarians who choose to work in prisons face some very special challenges. Before examining the professional and human factors that determine if a professional librarian can function effectively and be successful in the prison environment, it is useful to take a look the purpose of imprisonment today, the size and composition of incarcerated population groups, and the needs the library can fill for both inmate users and prison staff.

Over time, the Western world has seen changes in the philosophy of what constitutes the nature and purpose of incarceration in society. Today there is still considerable difference among nations on this issue, a fact that is reflected in their widely varying incarceration rates. The pendulum has swung back and forth between emphasis on rehabilitation and punishment/retribution. Today most Western nations attempt to strike a balance between rehabilitation of the offender and public safety. Recently the concept of "restorative justice" (making the victim "whole") has begun to influence prison programs. Rehabilitation, i.e. preparing the offender to function productively as a law abiding citizen in society, is very costly and such programs as academic and vocational education, drug and alcohol treatment, and psychological and social services usually suffer when incarceration rates rise. The United States today has the dubious distinction of having doubled its incarceration rate in the 1985-95 decade, although overall crime rates have remained virtually unchanged. According to data by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, the U.S. incarceration rate is 600 per 100,000, only surpassed by Russia with 690. In contrast, the incarceration rate in Scandinavia is 62, the Netherlands 65, Germany 85, Spain 105, and Japan 37. With a total prison and jail population today of over 1.5 million, the United States has experienced a major prison construction boom over the last fifteen years. Most of these new facilities include a library with general interest materials and legal collections. Hundreds of new prison librarian and support staff positions have been created, but the supply of qualified candidates has not kept up with demand.

Professional librarians work in both adult and juvenile institutions and their patrons range in age from school children to older adults. In the Unites States, the fastest growing inmate group is the elderly, primarily due to increasingly longer sentences, less frequent use of parole, and the higher percentage of the incarcerated population being violent offenders. Due to overcrowding, non-violent offenders are more likely to be supervised in less restrictive community settings. The incarceration rate of racial/ethnic minorities is disproportionately high and the percentage of non- or limited English speaking inmates is growing, primarily Hispanics and Southeast Asians. In some states, the percentage of inmates with drug and alcohol treatment needs is as high as 60 or 70 percent. A large number of inmates (between 50 and 60 percent) have not completed high school, and many adults and juveniles associate the traditional school system with a long string of academic and personal failures. This fact is, of course, related to the offenders' lack of vocational skills and their inability to find and maintain gainful employment in today's technology dominated job market. The next logical step in this

vicious circle is often the commitment of a crime.

One can safely say that incarcerated persons have a large number of unmet needs, which translate into a high demand for information, learning materials, and self-improvement resources; the library, in cooperation with other prison programs, can play a vital role in meeting these needs. An inmate who wants to use his time constructively is likely to become an avid library user, and when time comes to prepare for release, the prison library can provide him with a wealth of job and career related materials as well as community information that may help him survive the first critical months on the outside.

The modern prison library

What constitutes the most important roles of a modern prison library? They are not very different than those of a public library. In 1992, Rhea Joyce Rubin developed a library planning model specifically for prison libraries that has been used in the states of Massachusetts and Wisconsin in the United States. This model evolved from the widely used ***Planning and Role Setting in Public Libraries*** (1987) and ***Output Measures for Public Libraries*** (1987) by McClure et. al.[1] Rubin's ***Planning Process for Wisconsin Institution Libraries: A Workbook*** (1997) identifies the following possible roles for the prison library:

- **Popular reading materials center** (i.e. circulation of recreational reading materials)
- **Independent learning center** (e.g. assistance in self-directed reading for lifelong learning and personal needs, information on careers and vocational skills, reference services, and assistance with correspondence courses)
- **Formal education support center** (i.e. information on educational opportunities, and materials and services supporting adult basic education, English for non-native speakers, vocational education, and post secondary education courses)
- **Leisure and recreation activities center** (e.g. book discussions, film showings, cultural programs, chess club)
- **Legal information center** (e.g. legal research tools, case materials, legal forms)
- **Treatment program support center** (e.g. resources to support substance abuse and anger control programs)
- **Information center on outside community** (e.g. reentry information, contact information, social service agency referrals)
- **Personal retreat center** (i.e. place for patrons to find privacy, quiet, and independent choice)
- **Staff research center** (i.e. resource provider or clearinghouse for work-related materials and information
- **School curriculum support center** (in juvenile facilities, provide materials that supplement textbooks and enhance classroom activities and study).[2]

Because of limited civilian staff, funding and space, no single prison library can perform all these roles. Often the librarian is the only professional employed and all support staff are inmate workers. The librarian must manage all aspects of the library operation and is forced to concentrate on services that have the most impact and serve the largest number of patrons. Other factors influence the decision of which roles to emphasize; they include the size and security level of the institution, the method of library access (restricted or free), the demographics of the inmate population, the length of sentences they are serving, and the range and nature of other activities and services available, such as treatment and education programs, social services, and inmate employment opportunities.

Whether the selection of primary and secondary roles is the result of a thorough needs assessment or simply dictated by necessity, the fact is that the majority of prison libraries in the Unites States see their primary functions as popular materials center and legal information center. The support role for independent learning is also very important, as is that of community information center. Inmates use libraries very heavily -- up to ten times as much as

people on the outside. If the library has a current and well balanced collection, indicators like circulation per capita and collection turnover rate (average annual circulation per item) can be very high in a prison library.[3]

The library program does not function independently but operates within the larger prison environment, whose mission and security policies often conflict with the library profession's code of ethics and its belief in free access to information. The prison environment is an untraditional and inhospitable territory with priorities that challenge "traditional" librarianship and philosophies. How does one provide information freely in a tightly controlled environment with rules and regulations governing almost all aspects of daily life? How does one encourage library patrons to make choices about their reading matter and the pursuit of individual interests, when in almost all other aspects of their lives they have no autonomy? How does one meet the information and diverse reading needs of a large multicultural population?

In a major 1974 U.S. study of prison libraries, Marjorie LeDonne observed: "I have come to realize that while space, time, money, training, and adequate support staff are all important, the key to quality correctional library service is the turn of mind, the energy and the sense of dedication which the librarian ... brings to the job."[4] In other words, it takes a very special person with not only a sound educational background, but also certain human qualities. It is easier to define and quantify the academic requirements than the more intangible human skills; existing standards and guidelines mainly deal with the former.

Preparation and attitude

The 1995 IFLA ***Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners*** and the fairly recent U.S. ***Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions*** and British ***Guidelines for Prison Libraries*** all address library staff qualifications and staffing levels.[5] The IFLA document states that the person employed as librarian should have "the necessary qualifications in library science skills and the ability to work effectively in a prison environment" (p. 12). It also emphasizes the importance of being aware of prisoners' immediate and potential needs.

The U.S. standards are very specific as to academic qualifications and work experience for all library staff. They call for a library director with an ALA accredited MLS or equivalent AND two years experience in a professional capacity in a library. This position should act as department head and direct all library services and operations in the institution. Familiarity with all aspects of library management is required. Staffing levels are indicated in accordance with institution size, and where additional professional positions are called for, the basic academic qualification is likewise a ALA accredited MLS degree. In addition to the specific academic and work experience, the standards state that library staff at all levels shall be selected for their ability to work in a correctional environment. The standards also recommend that each state employ a central coordinator of prison library services with extensive administrative and consultant experience. Research by this author indicates that twenty-two of the fifty states have such a position; where it does not exist, many of the prison library related functions are performed by the consultant in the state library agency who works with other disadvantaged population groups.

The newly revised British guidelines are also very helpful in defining the qualifications of professional library staff and library security staff. The publication even includes a specific training program for each position, which each new employee must undergo. For the librarian, these "induction" modules include orientation on job responsibilities and organizational structure. The guidelines were developed according to the governance model in the UK, under which the national Prison Service contracts with local public library authorities for staffing. The prison librarian must be a Chartered Member of the Library Association and should also be a member of the Prison Libraries Group of the Library Association. The guidelines call for the head librarian to be recognized as a supervisor and to be a member of the prison management team. The requirements for prison library officer (combining security and library

specific functions) and library orderly are also included.

In the state of Wisconsin, USA, this author developed the generic correctional librarian position description on which the civil service exam is based. The vast majority of position functions and responsibilities fall under the definition of traditional library management and service, like reference and information retrieval, collection development, readers' advisory, circulation, interlibrary loan, bibliographic instruction, and patron programs (strong emphasis on adult literacy programs). Only about ten percent of the time is taken up with prison specific activities, like inmate supervision, disciplinary hearings, and prison committees. All librarians are required to participate in regular training related to information technology, library skills, and correctional issues.

In 1995-96, IFLA's Section of Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons conducted an international survey of library schools to gather information on the extent to which their curricula included courses or components on how to provide library services to disadvantaged persons. Prisoners was one of the thirteen disadvantaged population groups identified. Of the 88 library schools that responded, only 24 indicated that they included service to prisoners in their curriculation.[6] [IFLA Journal 23 (1997) 5/6, p.369] This survey and extensive information obtained from conversation and correspondence with library school faculty in the United States, Canada and Europe, confirm this author's belief that prison librarianship is still not widely recognized as a viable career option. And even those academic institutions that do teach courses on how to serve users with special needs or include reference to such services in their general courses, do not necessarily encourage careers in prison librarianship.

In the Unites States, correctional agencies have difficulty hiring qualified librarians in spite of aggressive recruitment. And the salaries and benefits are generally competitive with the public library sector. To make library school students more aware of existing prison libraries and their growing number of patrons, professor Linda Lucas Walling of the University of South Carolina, USA, has developed a special course on correctional librarianship. The objectives of the course are to make the students able to

- identify and discuss issues related to contemporary corrections
- identify and discuss issues related to contemporary librarianship in correctional institutions
- discuss the relationship between the library and the institution
- describe the differences and similarities among correctional, public and school libraries
- discuss basic activities and services typically carried out in libraries in correctional institutions.

The textbook for the course is ***Libraries Inside: A Practical Guide for Prison Librarians,*** [7] one of the few recent publications covering all aspects of prison libraries. An eight-part video series and nine audiotapes were also developed in conjunction with the course. This author has used these resources for orientation of new prison librarians.

The similarities between prison libraries and public libraries are greater than the differences. A broad academic education in traditional librarianship that includes coursework in outreach services, literacy, multicultural resources, legal collections, and materials for the learning disabled, is probably the best foundation on which to build a career in prison librarianship. If this training also provides the opportunity to pursue special interest topics, a practicum or internship in a prison library, so much the better. Experienced prison librarians can also provide library school students with insight into their work world through lectures, seminars, and symposia. In the state of Wisconsin, such cooperation exists between the Department of Corrections and the state's two ALA accredited library schools. The Department has also provided occasional part-time jobs for library school students.

Experience has shown that new prison librarians have a better chance for success, if they have additional education or work experience in other areas like psychology, criminology, teaching,

social work, or counseling. It also helps to have worked a few years in a non-prison library. Since many prison librarians work in relative isolation from colleagues in the outside world, it is very important that they be involved in professional associations, meet with other prison and non-prison librarians for mutual support and problem solving, participate in workshops to upgrade skills, and have the opportunity to communicate with other professionals through e-mail and electronic discussion groups. Having a mentor program that pairs a new librarian with an experienced professional is also very helpful. All the academic training, networking, and work experience, however, will not guarantee a librarian success in a prison environment -- certain other human skills are absolutely essential, and not all of them can be taught!

It is important to understand that many people do not have the personality needed to work in a prison. All prison staff must understand the purpose of the organization and the dynamics of the prison community. They must have the ability to internalize basic values and goals while working effectively within this environment often filled with ambiguity. The work requires flexibility, patience, emotional stability, a high tolerance for stress, and a sense of humor.

In prison crises occur regularly and one must adjust quickly to changing situations, like a lockdown, sudden transfer of inmate workers, irrational outbursts, unexpected budget cuts, and equipment breakdown. Not loosing one's cool is essential, since it may appear as a weakness that can be exploited. Stressful situations abound, since inmates are very needy, demanding and impatient. One patron will often monopolize the librarian's attention with the result that other pressing tasks are postponed. Support from the administration may not always be forthcoming, and the prison bureaucracy may seem formidable. Some administrative decisions may appear arbitrary. A sense of humor is essential; it relieves stress and defuses tense situations. Humor also improves relationships with inmates and co-workers and can reduce the inevitable barrier between security and program staff. It helps a person see problems in perspective and avoid "burnout", an occupational hazard generally defined as a state of indifference or cynicism resulting from frustration and a feeling of helplessness. Being mentally able to leave work behind at the end of the day helps one stay sane.

Librarians are service providers -- if they do not have a genuine desire to help, they are in the wrong job! In the prison milieu, the antagonistic mentality of the "powerful against the powerless" is pervasive. By being responsive to needs and interests, the librarian can have much impact on the inmates' lives while exemplifying the exception to the hostility rule. The library is one of the few places in the prison where the inmate can feel at ease and be confident that his requests will be attended to. This responsiveness makes the librarian and the library appreciated.

Helpfulness is related to sincerity. Doing what one promises establishes credibility -- if the librarian does not have it, no inmate will respect him or the library. Fairness and tolerance are equally important. The librarian must be comfortable working with persons from many different social, racial and cultural backgrounds and must be able to leave any personal bias aside when selecting materials and responding to inmate preferences and interests. Treating everybody fairly without showing favoritism is equally important; that also means following policies and procedures to the letter both with inmate patrons and inmate library workers. All inmates should receive the same treatment regardless of the offense committed, and the librarian should be able to respect them as individual human beings. Making exceptions opens one to manipulation and the loss of control. Fairness, however, does not exclude firmness and assertiveness -- these are other personality traits that enable the librarian to be effective. And in order to be considered a mature professional, the librarian should always exhibit good judgment and be willing to make decisions and take responsibility.

Certain human skills can make working with inmates much easier. Good communications skills can be learned and are essential when dealing with a culturally diverse population; this includes the ability to listen and understand non-verbal clues. Library staff interact with many sociopaths and persons with behavior disorders, and almost all inmates have personal problems. It takes a wise person to draw the line between showing empathy and getting

emotionally involved in the inmates' personal problems.

Problem solving skills are equally important and are also related to the provision of good reference and referral service. And it helps to use common sense and rational thinking in dealing with demands that are often irrational.

Teaching skills are most useful; most inmates are not "traditional" library users and need to learn how to use the library and the available technology. Inmate library workers must also be trained and closely supervised. It is important to develop professional relationships with the workers, since their cooperation and support are essential to the smooth operation of the library.

The librarians must have expertise in public relations and marketing techniques. Library services must be promoted to potential patrons who, although they constitute a "captive" audience, will not necessarily use the library.

Censorship is a touchy subject with prison librarians. In spite of their personal commitment to free access to information, they must recognize that certain materials may pose a threat to institution security, e.g. topics on bomb making, prison escapes, and martial arts. Being able to accept that certain restrictions are imposed on the selection of materials can make the difference in whether or not one survives on the job.

With so many demands on one's time, the librarian must learn how to see the big picture, to plan and set priorities. One must accept that it is impossible to satisfy all people all the time; this author has seen several prison libraries fall to pieces, while the librarian was drowning in details.

There are, however, many rewards for a good prison librarian. This person must take satisfaction in providing direct services and creating and creating a library suited to the specific needs of a diverse and receptive group. The majority of the inmates value the library and appreciate what the librarian does. Many become library users for the first time in prison and see a whole new world open up. There are success stories of inmates who have learned to read with the help of a librarian or a library literacy program.

Inmate library workers often test a new librarian, but once he or she has passed the test by being fair, firm, and respectful of the workers as individuals, they usually become very protective and staunch promoters of the library.

It may sound trite, but it is indeed gratifying to know that one has made a difference in somebody's life and is remembered with fondness, like a Wisconsin inmate who responded to a library survey with the following comment: "The librarian is a good and sincere person who makes me think of many new things -- although she won't let me chew gum!"

Notes:

1. Charles R. McClure et al., Planning & Role Setting for Public Libraries (Chicago: American Library Association, 1987); Nancy A. Van House et al., Output Measures for Public Libraries (Chicago: American Library Association, 1987).

2. Rhea Joyce Rubin, The Planning Process for Wisconsin Institution Libraries (Oakland, CA: Rubin Consulting, 1997).

3. From annual statistical reports produced by adult and juvenile correctional libraries, Wisconsin Department of Corrections, USA.

4. Marjorie LeDonne, "Survey of Library and Information Problems in Correctional Facilities: A Retrospective Review," Library Trends 26/1, p. 69.

5. Frances E. Kaiser, ed., Guidelines for Library Service to Prisoners, 2nd rev. ed., (The Hague: IFLA , 1995); Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions (Chicago: American Library Association/Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies, 1992); Roy Collis and Liz Boden, eds., Guidelines for Prison Libraries (London: Library Association Publishing, 1997).

6. Anne M. Galler, "The Inclusion of Library Services to Disadvantaged Persons in Library School Curricula," IFLA Journal vol.23, No. 5/6, 1997.

7. Rhea Joyce Rubin and Daniel Suvak, eds., Libraries Inside: A Practical Guide for Prison Librarians (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1995).

Latest Revision: *June 7, 1999*

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